

An Applied Approach to Archeology in Palau

One of the greatest challenges Pacific Islands face is how to combat threats to cultural resources from tourist development. Although not inherently detrimental, tourism can sometimes purposely or inadvertently impact important cultural or historical properties depending on a milieu of economic, social, and political factors. How smaller island states grapple with this issue thus becomes extremely important and can determine the extent of damage that occurs.

Ironically, tourism is also one of the few types of development that can provide a means for preserving and protecting cultural resources, while at the same time facilitating economic sustainability. In this paper we describe efforts by the University of Oregon and Palau Division of Cultural Affairs (DCA) to incorporate and promote cultural resources in a tourist-driven economy. The Palau Stone Money Project, developed in response to some of these potential threats, has now evolved into an applied archeological program encompassing cooperative research, education, and training between various agencies. We believe that this project can serve as a model for conducting research in Micronesia and other regions where these issues are of concern.

Palau Division of Cultural Affairs staff member Calvin Emesiochel at a Yapese stone money quarry on Orrak Island. Photos by Scott M. Fitzpatrick.



We began working together in 1997 while writing Palau's five-year plan for historical and cultural resource preservation under a project with the University of Oregon's Micronesia and South Pacific Program. Since then we have organized numerous cooperative archeological research projects funded by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and the Hawaii East-West Center. The goal of these projects has been to provide field and computerized data management training for new DCA staff and those in the agency who needed to update their skills in particular areas. Sites impacted by development or those already in the process of being investigated by the DCA as part of their own national cultural resource inventory were chosen for the earlier projects to record damage and aid in reconnaissance survey.

Although training for DCA staff has been the major objective for these projects, other considerations—including ethnography, cooperative research, education, and facilitating inter-agency collaboration—have been taken into account to ensure that the data collected are comprehensive in content and accessible to a wide range of researchers and public interest groups. The archeological research projects we have initiated, including the Palau Stone Money Project, are applied in nature and not solely research driven, allowing for broader recognition of what the DCA's responsibilities are and the significance of Palau's cultural resources. In this way we can apply archeology using "anthropological methods, concepts, or knowledge to solve nonacademic problems, formulate public policy, and educate the public."¹ We explain how our interest in this program evolved and why we feel this type of applied organization is useful and necessary.

Background

Palau is a small archipelago in the Western Caroline Islands of Micronesia with over 300 islands ranging from those volcanic in origin to coral platforms and atolls. It harbors one of the most diverse ecosystems in the Pacific (with

almost three times the coral and fish species as other Western Pacific islands), is off the beaten path of typhoons, and is widely considered one of the top places in the world for scuba diving. While its ecological diversity is notably attractive, only in recent years has this small island state caught the attention of tourists. Between 1993 and 1999 total visitor arrivals to Palau increased from 40,497 a year² to around 70,003, an increase of 75% in a matter of years. While Palau's tourism base is largely structured around diving and eco-tour operations, an advertisement campaign geared toward promoting the visitation of archeological sites is now being heavily touted by the Palau Visitors Authority (PVA). However, the possible impacts to culturally sensitive areas resulting from visiting tourists and associated infrastructure development are many and can include the removal of artifacts, destruction of features, soil erosion, graffiti, and garbage, to name a few. This is, of course, a major concern for the DCA, the sole agency responsible for overseeing the protection, preservation, and management of cultural and historical properties in Palau. One of the many types of sites the DCA has recently been involved with are Yapese stone money quarries. Because these sites are now being developed or promoted as eco-tourist attractions, they have become the focus of our applied archeology program.

The Palau Stone Money Project

As early as perhaps 600 years ago Yapese islanders voyaged to Palau to quarry their famous stone "money" out of limestone deposits in the Rock Islands. These stone "money" disks, some of which are over three meters in diameter and weigh several metric tons, were carved into circular disks, perforated with a hole in the center, and carried back to Yap on rafts and canoes. After

European traders became involved in the transport of stone money during the late 1800s, disks were carved using metal tools and transported on larger ships, thus lowering their value as quarrying and transportation became easier. The Yapese exchanged various goods, exotic foodstuffs, and provided corvée labor to the Palauans to help secure quarrying rights, and traded copra (dried coconut meat) to the Europeans for their part in transporting disks and quarry workers. Scott Fitzpatrick first became interested in this unusual exchange network while working with the DCA in 1997 during their monitoring of access improvements to the Metuker ra Bisech quarry by the Airai state government and PVA.

Several stone money quarries are being documented and others surely exist but have not yet been identified. Because both local and international visitors frequent these sites and have left some notable impacts including graffiti, there became an opportunity for us to work together to document and record these sites to help increase awareness about the significance they have for Palauan and Yapese history.

We began this project with a preliminary survey of Omis Cave (B:OR-1:35) in 1998. Prior to this work, ethnographic and ethnohistorical data provided the only information about this exchange system; intensive archeological surveys had not been conducted to answer questions about how and why Yapese Islanders quarried stone money in Palau and the duration of this activity. In 1999, Fitzpatrick and two University of Oregon undergraduate students worked with the DCA archeology staff excavating portions of Omis Cave likely to reveal evidence of quarrying and habitation activities. This project was the first real opportunity for DCA staff to become involved in an excavation of a site from start to finish (as most of their responsibilities revolve around inventory and recording due to the sheer quantity of sites and a limited staff), and allowed U.S. students to work closely with Palauan archeologists. During our work at Omis Cave we recorded three unfinished stone money disks, a dock constructed of coral and limestone rubble (presumably to facilitate the transport of stone money), and other features associated with quarrying activities. Material culture recovered from the site included over 7,100 pieces of limestone debitage, nearly 200 pottery sherds, charcoal, and a faunal assemblage with fish bone and 31 families of shellfish represented.

Palau Historical and Cultural Advisory Board members, DCA staff, and Klobaker Ngermid (Chief of Ngermid Village) visiting excavation in progress at Omis Cave. Photos by Scott M. Fitzpatrick.



While the work was in progress, segments of the training were filmed and shown on the local cable television network. We worked with permission from the local chiefs of Ngermid Village (Klobak er Ngermid) and with Palauan government agencies including the Bureau of Lands and Survey (BLS) office staff who, throughout the years, have provided us with equipment, map data, and technical assistance. In the summer of 2000 we conducted excavations at two additional quarries—Metuker ra Bisech and Chelechol ra Orrak. This phase of the project involved eight University of Oregon anthropology students and DCA staff in an intensive survey as part of Fitzpatrick's Ph.D. research funded with help from a National Science Foundation dissertation research improvement grant and a Sigma Xi grant-in-aid for research.

Summary of Results

Our work at Yapese stone money quarries has provided the first archeological data about this fascinating regional exchange network and also provided a glimpse of how Palauan-Yapese inter-relationships evolved through time. Interagency cooperation has helped us gather this site information more efficiently (using survey equipment from the BLS, for example), and helped increase government and community awareness about the DCA's role in protecting and preserving Palau's cultural resources. The recording of fieldwork in progress by the local cable television station also helped achieve this goal and, according to Palau Historical and Cultural Advisory Board members who visited the site, was especially important because it demonstrated how Palauan archeologists and outside researchers are participating together in the process of applying archeology.

As Palau continues to promote archeological sites in tourist guides and brochures we hope that local exposure of the Palau Stone Money Project encourages tourists and other visitors to appreciate the significance of Palau's cultural resources. We also hope that it encourages cooperative efforts for their preservation, protection, and management among agencies like the DCA, BLS, Palau Visitors Authority, and state governments. The placement of Omis on the Palau National Register of Historic Places as a result of data collected during our survey was just one step in achieving this goal.

An exciting aspect of this project is the recognition that we have only begun to scratch the surface of truly applying archeology in Palau. With new technological advances in filmmaking and site recording, the possibilities for educating the public are limitless. In the future we hope to play an even bigger role in establishing a forum for discussing issues related to cultural resources and Palauan history with government agencies, NGOs, tour operators, museums, and the like. As most archeologists would agree, the pursuit of applied work, especially as it pertains to public outreach and education, is critical for developing a long-term cultural resource management program. We expect the Palau Stone Money Project to begin addressing additional issues concerning tourism such as annual data collection on the number of site visitors and studies on how tourism affects archeological sites, while expanding these applied research methods to other cultural properties in Palau. This project can then serve as a model for a broad-based archeological research program geared toward the involvement of not just outside researchers, but the public and special interest groups who have an interest in preserving and protecting Palau's rich cultural heritage.

Notes

- ¹ Charles E. Downum and Laurie J. Price, "Applied Archaeology." *Human Organization* 58:3 (1999): 226-239.
- ² N. Douglas and N. Douglas, "Social and Cultural Impact of Tourism in the South Pacific." In *Tourism in the Pacific: Issues and Cases*, C. M. Hall and S. J. Page, eds, (London: International Thomson Business Press, 1996), 49-64.
- ³ Palau Visitor News, Fourth Quarter Results (1999): 7.

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Vicky N. Kanai has been the Historic Preservation Officer and Chief of the Palau Division of Cultural Affairs since 1988, and oversees the administration of staff members involved in a variety of historic preservation projects and special programs. To date, her staff has participated in five University of Oregon training projects at six different sites in Palau—two of these stone money quarries.